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A Twisted Skein of Desire: Confession, Gaze, and Time in Andre Aciman's

Call Me by Your Name

by

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Honors Thesis

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Introduction

In interacting with others, and particularly in intimate relationships with others, desire becomes a complex emotion entangled with the specific identifications of each person. These complications are also often shaped by social conventions, internal thoughts, and the ability to communicate. In all its narrative structures, themes, and plot points, Andre Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* is framed by one question on this topic, stated in a time of deep conflict by the narrator: "Are 'being' and 'having' thoroughly accurate verbs in the twisted skein of desire, where having someone's body to touch and being that someone we're longing to touch are one and the same?" (Aciman 68). From this question alone, readers can see that Aciman is interested in working through integral questions about desire and possession through this novel. A skein in the literal sense is "a loosely coiled and knotted section of yarn or thread," but regarding both this quote and this novel, a skein can be understood as "a tangled or complicated arrangement, state, or situation" (Lexico). Aciman uses this complicated image of a tangled and twisted loop as a frame for the ways in which his characters work through and conceptualize their desires and actions. This twisted skein is not only a cyclic image, but one that is unresolvable. Analyzing desire in Aciman's novel may answer some questions about this skein, but will leave us with more questions as well.

The novel is set in a villa in Northern Italy during a summer in the 1980s. The narrator, Elio, is a seventeen-year-old musical prodigy whose father, a classics professor, invites a graduate student to stay the summer in his villa every year. This summer, that is Oliver, a twenty-four-year-old graduate student from Columbia. While the novel takes place during this idyllic summer, it is narrated by Elio from a retrospective point of view, which structures our view of the situation through his eyes. The removed setting of a villa in northern Italy allows for

the characters to grow within an isolated social environment, where internal reflections build the intrigue of desire.

Additionally, as a coming of age novel dealing with a same-sex relationship it can be placed in connection with other modern queer texts, such as *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo, and *We are Okay* by Nina LaCour. Within this genre, desire is often complicated by the variations in sexuality and gender-identity of the characters, as evidenced within this novel. This text also can be considered in the homosexual narrative genre, where novels such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, *Maurice* by E. M. Forster, and *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin lie. This genre uses introspective narration to demonstrate desires is entangled with conflicted identifications. In turning back to the relevance of the narrator's retrospection, Elio's narrative gaze can be seen as what Nishant Shahani calls "queer retrospection," where hypothetical temporalities are structured and time itself is made subjective (27). Through this specific narration, readers are able to visualize the effects of the public eye and the private reflection on desire. Furthermore, comprehending the ways in which desires can interact in the novel allows us to better understand our own desires, as well as the desires of those around us.

This paper will move through three frames through which Elio conceptualizes and interacts with this 'twisted skein of desire.' The first section picks apart the variations in form and content of confession in the novel to elucidate the ways in which conceptions of the relationship between desires and actions lead to twists in the states of desire within the novel. Elio's desires are restricted within structures of public discourse and his desire to express his differing desires grounded in the modern conception of confession: turning both actions and internal desires into discourse. This need for discourse leads Elio to physically and verbally

confess his desire for Oliver. By confessing, Elio irreversibly alters their identifications with desires and relationship. I end this section by analyzing Oliver's complicated ideological belief that one should attempt to separate actions and desires. These variations in identification and identities emphasize the ways in which same-sex desires are bounded by social structures of discourse.

The second section aims to analyze the ways in which Elio's narratorial gaze takes an objectifying view of Oliver to express male-male desire. However, as Oliver returns and challenges Elio's gaze, the subject-object relationship becomes inverted and their relationship is subjectified, meaning that Elio must engage with Oliver as a person and not an object. Furthermore, as Elio objectifies Oliver through the figures of an apricot and a peach, overlapping roles of consumption and sexual desire take place. Finally, with Oliver returning Elio's gaze and consumptive actions, the objective gaze is shown to be impossible: Elio and Oliver become two subjects who interact with each other through the desires to both possess and be, highlighting the twisted skein.

The final section analyzes the ways in which Elio's narratorial structuring of time is inherently subjective, shaped by sexual desires and age. With framing by the queer theories of Nishant Shahani and Jack Halberstam, readers can conceptualize how Elio's retrospective narration is structured around events in time that shift Elio's worldview. Not only is Elio's reflection discriminatory, but his father also imparts a structuring of time that is impacted by age and regret over desires unacted upon. This section concludes with a look at the final passage of the novel determining the fate of this twisted skein. All of these analyses draw from queer theory. Ranging from Joseph Bristow, Eve Sedgwick and Michel Foucault to Diana Fuss and Jonathan Alexander, as well as the already mentioned theorists and others, my reading of this

novel engages with the concepts of desire and identification in a frame that is based heavily on same-sex desire.

Call Me by Your Name uses three modes of reference to claim that same-sex desires are inevitably built from a twisted skein of desires. Specifically, through the use of confession, Aciman highlights the ways in which internal desires can conflict with external identities, leading to a need to turn desires into actions. He demonstrates how same-sex desires are twisted in this skein through the conflict between internal and external. In looking at narratorial gaze and the objectifications of Oliver, readers see that consumptive and sexual desires are inseparable through Elio's shift from objectifying gaze to interacting with Oliver in entangled ways. Finally, through eliciting a queer structuring of time, Aciman demonstrates the ways in which nostalgia and regret make resolving the twisted skein of desire impossible.

Confession

Variations in the form and content of what one can confess are integral to the ways in which desire is portrayed throughout the novel. In particular, Elio's ability to confess his desire for Oliver relies heavily on his own perception of how others will react. This ability to confess ties deeply with the shame and guilt he correlates with such a desire. Structurally, his ability to confess relies on his desire for the confession to act as a performative utterance: by confessing/uttering his desire, an inalterable change needs to happen (Austin 8). Contrastingly, Oliver is in part desirable because of his ability for self-restraint. In the scenario of confession and acting upon desire, Oliver remains struck with the conceptual difference between desires and actions. This difference, as well as the need for Elio to confess his desire, demonstrates ways in which this twisted skein known as desire creates conflicts of identification.

In particular, because Elio experiences same-sex attraction towards Oliver, the heteronormative structures of society create a particular frame within male-to-male desire can be expressed. This first passage focuses on the comfort he can take in admiring someone that people universally appreciate:

Seeing everyone take such a liking to him, I found a strange, small oasis of peace. What could possibly be wrong with liking someone everyone else liked? . . . I was like men who openly declare other men irresistibly handsome the better to conceal that they're aching to embrace them. To withhold universal approval would simply alert others that I had concealed motives for needing to resist him. (38)

While this passage initially indicates a safety net, the complexities surrounding Elio acknowledging a desire for Oliver are revealed. Elio expresses that through Oliver's inherent attractive characteristics, appreciating and approving him is normalized and therefore justifiable. However, the conflict that Elio narrates indicates the restrictions of this normalization. One way to understand these restrictions is through the lens of societal expectations on sexual desire. In particular, Joseph Bristow explains that this can result in "tempestuous sexual desires [being] inevitably trapped within a system of suppression and liberation" (9). This entrapment of desires is exhibited here through the careful trade-off that Elio describes regarding concealment versus expression. In this double-edged sword for men declaring other men attractive, readers see where certain types of desire can be trapped within a particular system of discourse. Elio both gains some peace from possessing a desire that superficially parallels others, but also gains a sense of shame and guilt because his desire must be twisted in ways to be acceptable within a restricted regime governing displays of male-male desire. Through expressing his desire in this way, he submits himself to a power structure based around a normalized ideal of appreciable beauty.

Conflicted between expressing his desire and the restrictions of the social structure, Elio turns to confession. In order to better elucidate the structures creating this double-edged sword of

desire, readers can also turn to confession. Specifically, this restrictive structure can be seen to stem from the Catholic confession's shaping of bodily and sexual discourse. As Foucault states in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, confession itself underwent a change in the seventeenth century where not only should desires be confessed when in the realm of monasteries, but with everyone. This change was a shift in the intensity to which one identifies with the acts being confessed: "not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse" (21). This idea of transforming any desire into discourse functions as a method wherein which desires are all policed to correlate within a normalized range of discourse. Not only does Elio desire Oliver, he also desires the pleasure of confessing that desire. In Elio's statement that this confession of 'open desire' is a normalized piece of discourse, he also realizes that this act of declaration functions to potentially suppress the internal desire through a restrictive social discourse.

This conflict between the normalized discourse over Oliver and Elio's comprehension of his own attraction becomes clearer when Elio expresses a need to confess his specific attraction to Oliver:

There was no one to speak to. Whom could I tell? Mafalda? She'd leave the house. My aunt? She'd probably tell everyone. Marzia, Chiara, my friends? They'd desert me in a second. My cousins when they came? Never. My father who held the most liberal views-- but on this? Who else? Write to one of my teachers? See a doctor? Say I needed a shrink? Tell Oliver?

Tell Oliver. There is no one else to tell, Oliver, so I'm afraid it's going to have to be you . . . (61)

This passage takes on a stark confessional structure, particularly towards the reader where one is given a sense that Elio is confessing to readers about his desire to confess his feelings for Oliver. Elio lists potential confidants in a way that demonstrates how he views his desire as

something that cannot be shared with everyone. His ordering of potential confidants is particularly interesting. His first choice is the women surrounding him, all individuals who also express an appreciation and desire for Oliver's beauty. However, an inability to confide in them follows from the point of the previous passage—that the level to which a man can express desire for another man is only allowed if it reinforces the standards of attraction. This is emphasized by Elio's questions and answers revealing fears based on rejection or a lack of secrecy: both aspects desired for confession. Furthermore, in transitioning towards his father and the doctor, he expresses three main fears of expressing this desire that all culminate in rejection: Mafalda running away, his aunt further revealing his desire, and the doctor wanted to 'fix' him. The repetition and focus on his inability to confide in another individual highlights the ways in which unacceptable desires are policed by others. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which his desire to express is twisted away from a public expression and towards a private confession.

In Elio's decision to confess to Oliver, the reader is shifted from a confession of desire to a public sphere, and instead to a confession that is personal. Elio places great focus on simply being able to speak and conceptualize his desire (and turn his desire into a discourse). However, in order to escape the potential social repercussions of his vocalized desires, he comes to realize that he must confide to the object of his desire: Oliver. This parallels Diana Fuss's discussion of the conflict between the public self and private self where "While we tend to experience our identities as part of our public personas--the most exposed part of our self's surface collisions with a world of other selves--we experience our identifications as more private, guarded, evasive" (Fuss 2). This passage in the novel is then not about choosing to reveal one's identifications to everyone but finding individuals worthy of confessing to. Similarly, Elio's desire to confess interacts with the world (his identifications do not align with other people's) but

he also desires for his identifications to remain private (and only confessed to Oliver). This shift in sphere (public to private) creates conflict with others, creating another twist in the skein that is his desire. His identification with a desire for Oliver must become part of his identity and interaction with Oliver.

However, following this conflict of identification and confession, Elio narrates to readers an act that fails to perform as a confession. Elio choose to express his physical desire for Oliver through masturbating in Oliver's swim trunks as an attempt to conflate his mental discourse with the physical:

I put his pillow over my face, kissed it savagely, and, wrapping my legs around it, told it what I lacked the courage to tell everyone else in the world. Then I told him what I wanted. It took less than a minute. / The secret was out of my body. So what if he saw. So what if he caught me. So what, so what, so what. (Aciman 62)

This passage conflates Elio's desire with the physical body. By connecting ejaculation with the revealing of his secret, Elio grounds his desire in the physical action of his body. With this metaphor linking speaking and masturbating, he attempts to convince himself that the confession has been completed, resulting in a physical act. However, the repetition of "so what" over and over implies that Elio senses that this confession is incomplete because it has the undefined response of 'if' Oliver sees it. This physical expression lacks fulfillment because it does not change the world around it: Elio did not have sex with Oliver, just his clothing. The narrative continues, and so this physical act fails to function as a true and fulfilling confession.

While this seems to portray an act that should definitively shift the interactions between Oliver and Elio, it is never acknowledged by Oliver because it was directed towards a stand-in for Oliver (his pillow). Elio is also unfulfilled by the lack of acknowledgement and verbally confesses his desire to Oliver, altering the narrative:

‘Why are you telling me all this?’ / ‘Because I thought you should know.’ / ‘Because you thought I should know.’ He repeated my words slowly, trying to take in their full meaning, all the while sorting them out, playing for time by repeating the words. . .
 ‘Because I want *you* to know.’ I blurted out. ‘Because there is no one else I can say it to but you.’ (72)

The quotation of Elio’s language usage here—as well as the repetition, inversion, and changes in emphasis—places focus structurally on the actual words to represent the implications of this utterance (the implications being that Elio desires Oliver). By repeating the phrase, Oliver allows Elio to clarify his utterance and confirm the meaning of this broad statement forcing Elio to emphasize this desirous identification. Following this statement, Elio emphasizes the exasperation of needing to repeatedly confirm this identity through blurting and focusing on the specificity of Oliver. In this scene Oliver is acknowledging that identification is not always constant, allowing for Elio to recant his statement, but Elio views this conversation as an irreversible confession by focusing on Oliver as the hearer of his confession.

Furthermore, by confessing his desire to the object of said desire, his desire moves from a statement within a public discourse to a performative utterance. In order to function as a performative utterance, his statement must be in appropriate circumstances and lead to other actions, much like a true confession requires intent (Austin 8). While a confession to others would initiate those fearful responses, confessing to Oliver elicits ‘more appropriate’ circumstances and fulfilled actions such as Oliver returning his expression of desire in a physical and verbal manner. Elio does not simply tell a family member about his desire. He utters his desire to the object of his desire, Oliver. Elio’s utterance functions as performative because it creates a response generated only through an interaction with the necessary participant (Oliver). This utterance leads to an unveiling of his desire and Oliver being required to respond. Through the directed nature of this confession, Elio is able to create action with his words.

However, in another twist in this skein of desire, Oliver and Elio do not hold the same ideological understanding of how internal desires and actions relate. Oliver's desire for self-restraint and control is particularly important. After Elio and Oliver begin kissing to demonstrate their mutual desire for the other, Oliver pauses, and breaks the silence by stating, "I think we should go. . . We can't do this--I know myself. So far we've behaved. We've been good. Neither of us has done anything to feel ashamed of. Let's keep it that way. I want to be good'" (82). Oliver interprets the interaction between him and Elio as overindulgent, risking the collapse of self-restraint that should continue to be idealized as 'good.' This control over desire contrasts greatly with Foucault's previous description of how confession and discourse have shifted to include the internal and private. Similarly, Oliver's view contrasts with Elio's as Elio is filled with a need to confess his internal desire in order to create action. Instead, readers are given a character whose sense of morality contrasts with Foucault and the idea that the morality of behavior requires thoughts to also be constrained (*The Use of Pleasure* 26). While Oliver's acts of self-restraint throughout the novel do intimidate Elio, they also imply that Oliver holds an unsettled and complicated relationship with his desires.

This exhibition of restraint implies that Oliver has his own twisted skein to deal with when identifying his desires deeply related to his relationship with the public and the private. In attempts to comprehend Oliver's desire for separation between action and internal desire, readers can return to the complexity of public identity and private identifications. Fuss comments on the mutability of identifications on one's identity in order to claim that "identity is continually compromised, imperiled, one might even say embarrassed by identification" (10). For Oliver, his identity as good and having self-restraint is what he fears is in danger by desiring Elio. His internal desires for Elio are being forced to engage with his outer self-restraining identity. Unlike

Elio's connection with identification leading to his performative utterances, Oliver instead chooses to disidentify with his desirous identifications based upon a desire to not do "anything to feel ashamed of" (Aciman 82). This disidentification instead leads to his outer expression of self-constraint. In Oliver's case then, the conflict is less about confessing desire, and more about the actions that potentially follow such an utterance. However, while Elio views his confession as an irreversible action, Oliver demonstrates the complexity of repressing action and acknowledging desires simultaneously. Where Elio's desire did not align with the public discourse and he was driven to a private confession to Oliver, Oliver reciprocates his desires but attempts to divide private identifications and desires from his identity and actions. Both misalignments between the public and the private drove the confessions and continue to drive the interactions between Elio and Oliver and their desires in other ways as well.

Gaze

Visualized through the narrative gaze, Oliver's body becomes an integral piece in Elio's struggles with desire and confession through the constitutive conflict between unspoken desire and public engagement. Oliver's body is described in ways that emphasize public and private gaze, but with focus on the specificity of the hidden or untouched regions of his body. The physical descriptors parallel the desire for intimacy and confession by Elio. However, fruit and consumptive imagery reveal an inherently possessive gaze. Furthermore, Elio's narrative gaze often becomes inverted, contorted, or challenged through the interaction between his subject (Oliver) and himself. Elio's narratorial gaze is able to differ from what Laura Mulvey saw as the traditional male gaze: one that particularly objectifies, sexualizes, and flattens women and female characters (7). Elio's gaze conflicts through the challenging reflection of his male subject. The ability to depict other gazes highlights the restrictions Mulvey identifies in this traditional gaze

and contributes to the novel's play with desire and possession. While this gaze Mulvey identified as purely possessive over women, Elio's gaze loses its objectifying characteristics through a returned gaze by Oliver. Overall, the narration behind Elio's gaze reveals the ways in which bodies and desires become complicated through the conflict between possession and being.

One of the first descriptions readers get of Oliver's body focuses on his lack of exposure to sun. Specifically, the lack of sun exposure figures the ways in which Oliver's body has been hidden from public view, as well as the ways in which a Mediterranean and Italian setting idealizes the exposed body:

Despite a light tan acquired during his brief stay in Sicily earlier that summer, the color on the palms of his hands was the same as the pale soft skin of his soles, of his throat, of the bottom of his forearms, which hadn't really been exposed to much sun. Almost a light pink, as glistening and smooth as the underside of a lizard's belly. Private, chaste, unfledged, like a blush on an athlete's face or an instance of dawn on a stormy night. It told me things about him I never knew to ask. (Aciman 5)

In the physical sense, Oliver is coming from an environment where his body is less exposed to the sun. Similarly, through expressing a desire to view the untouched portions of Oliver's body, Elio also reveals a desire to get to know the private and personal side of Oliver. Aciman seems to place focus on the contrast between Oliver and everyone else through these descriptions of uncalloused feet and the private, unfledged body. Elio is able to objectify Oliver's body through a focus on the parts of Oliver's body that are not usually seen (by the sun). In this initial interaction, readers are already aware of the objectifying gaze that Elio takes on in response to Oliver's arrival. Additionally, through the retrospective narration, Elio reveals to readers that even in his 'current' time as a reflective narrator, he considers these bodily descriptions to function as figures for more private aspects of Oliver's body that are revealed during more intimate and sexual moments.

Elio's gaze and descriptions of Oliver focus on the specific way he views and fantasizes about Oliver's body. After a scene where Elio resists revealing to Oliver his thoughts, and Oliver moves to help pick ripe apricots from the family tree, Elio narrates his desire and his thoughts. In particular, Elio objectifies Oliver's body by relying on a separation of public knowledge and internal desire:

Of course, he had no idea what I'd been thinking minutes earlier, but the firm, rounded cheeks of the apricot with their dimple in the middle reminded me of how his body had stretched across the boughs of the tree with his tight, rounded ass echoing the color and the shape of the fruit. Touching the apricot was like touching him. He would never know, just as the people we buy the newspaper from and then fantasize about all night have no idea that this particular inflection on their face or that tan along their exposed shoulder will give us no end of pleasure when we're alone. (35)

In this scene, Oliver's body is very much idealized through the fruit metaphor as both Oliver and the fruit are in peak form, ready for consumption, and therefore objects to idealize and desire. Additionally, the connection between Oliver's body and the ripe apricot allows Elio to project his internalized desires on a physical object, creating an emotional connection that is safe from judgement. In emphasizing Oliver's lack of knowledge and then extrapolating his own internal desire as a commonplace experience, Elio creates a divide between the public world and internal desire. Furthermore, through refusing to reveal his thoughts, Elio expresses the twisted complications of his desire.

Specifically, those thoughts—idealization and fantasy of other's bodies—take a twist when readers realize this scene is boxed in on both sides by the reinforcement that the desired object remain ignorant of being desired. Specifically, Elio begins the paragraph reminding readers that Oliver is unaware of this gaze and Elio ends the paragraph reminding readers that this gaze is not perceived by the object (Oliver or the person selling newspapers). Jonathan

Alexander, in his book *Creep* echoes this experience as one common for homosexual desire and preserving a public sphere of discretion. In particular, the objectification of the male body requires a lack of speech because one does not want to acknowledge “the part that generates creepiness: we were doing something that was perfectly normal to anyone looking in, but there was always the possibility that one of us, namely me, could be interpreting it in completely inappropriate ways” (Alexander 138). In Elio emphasizing phrases such as “he would never know,” readers gain the sense that Elio’s gaze is paralleling Alexander’s own, as well as possessing an inherent desire to restrain this gaze. The twisted skein of desire is not only complicated by identifications, but also by the idea that some desires are inherently based in this creepiness.

Further paralleling Alexander’s demarcation of the potential energy (creepy or otherwise) behind a gaze or behavior, the inversion of gazes between Elio and Oliver challenges the standard objectifying gaze of a narrator. In recollecting the moment Oliver claims he first liked Elio, Elio places emphasis on the unspoken exchange:

The staring was no longer part of the conversation, or even of the fooling around with translation; it had superseded it and become its own subject, except that neither of us dared nor wanted to bring it up. And yes, there was such a luster in his eyes that I had to look away, and when I looked back at him, his gaze hadn’t moved and was still focused on my face, as if to say, *So you looked away and you’ve come back, will you be looking away soon?*—which was why I had to look away once more. . . He must have known exactly what I was feeling. (159)

The entire novel is structured around Elio’s reflective and outward gaze, with particular attention paid to Oliver. However, in this integral scene, the focus is on the loss of an objective gaze.

Elio’s gaze comes in contact and conflict with Oliver’s. Through the repetitive breaking and reforming of eye-contact, Elio emphasizes the ways in which he realizes his gaze is returned and

challenged and so averts his gaze. With the attention to the italicized lines, and Elio's repeated returns to gazing upon Oliver only to find Oliver gazing back, one can see the ways in which this interplay exhibits their communication on a nonverbal level.

This concept of unspoken communication surrounds what Eve Sedgwick determines to be the open secret of the closet. Specifically, she considers behaviors of male homosexuality to be surrounded by vague acknowledgements of desire that can be summed up in the phrase "I know you know" (Epistemologies 164). At this point of the novel and in this interaction, there has been no verbalized or public identification of desire. But their lack of verbal communication paired with the physical communication of their gazes implies an open secret of desire. Not only are the desires of this novel complicated by confessions and actions, but simple gazes tangle the state of their relationship with each other.

However, this returned gaze, while giving an idea of acknowledged desire, lacks the performative action that will fully convince Elio of mutual desire. Elio needs the expression of desire to be connected to further actions, and this repetitive breaking and returning of gazes fails to achieve that. In order to truly upend and define a type of gaze outside of Mulvey's traditional male gaze, the object can no longer be objectified. In one description of the eye-flirting within this novel, Elio reveals the potential for a returned gaze:

What made me blush in the end was not the natural embarrassment of the moment when I could tell he'd caught me trying to hold his gaze only then to let mine scamper to safety; what made me blush was the thrilling possibility, unbelievable as I wanted it to remain, that he might actually like me, and that he liked me in just the way I liked him. (159)

This particular contrast that Elio makes between a "natural embarrassment" and the "thrilling possibility" reveals the complexities that surround unspoken same-sex desire as opposed to unspoken heterosexual desire. Furthermore, the identification of this possibility functions to

progress Elio's own understanding of his desire. In Elio physically reacting to Oliver's gaze through the blush, Elio and Oliver both break away from their initial roles as subject and object. Fuss describes this process of inversion as "Subjectivity [being] the name we might give to the place of the other, to the place where I desire as another, to the place where I become other" (3). In identifying Oliver as someone who is able to gaze upon Elio, Elio is able to comprehend that his desire is reciprocated. The inversions and repetition in Elio's narration closely parallels Fuss's own description of this mode of identification: both emphasize shifting between the self and the other as a mode for also becoming the other. This mode seems to then function through interacting gazes between a subject and whatever/whomever is being objectified. This state of desires is such a twisted skein that Elio must invert his relational position with Oliver in order to comprehend a mutual desire. However, this also indicates that his earlier objectifying desirous gaze may also have been perceived and therefore altered.

In returning to that objectifying gaze, the object Elio connects repeatedly with Oliver's body and consumption with fruit—specifically apricots and peaches. The fruit is not only able to function as a figure for Oliver's body, but also as a medium for expressing desire for the body; this is seen particularly in the infamous scene where Elio masturbates into a peach and then Oliver arrives and teasingly and possessively eats said peach (Aciman 147-8). In Elio's narration of this consumption, readers are given a vivid image of Elio's emotional reaction:

I could tell he was tasting it at that very instant. Something that was mine was in his mouth, more his than mine now. I don't know what happened to me at that moment as I kept staring at him, but suddenly I had a fierce urge to cry. And rather than fight it, as with orgasm, I simply let myself go, if only to show him something equally private about me as well. I reached for him and muffled my sobs against his shoulder. (149)

In Oliver's consumption of the peach that symbolizes himself and Elio (through his cum), sexual desire and consumptive desire become intermingled. With the emphasis placed on the possessive

and inverted nature of Oliver eating this peach, not only is Elio also objectified and desired, but Oliver and Elio become further inseparable. Again, this relationship of desires ties into Fuss's theory about identification, where "it is not the object that the subject takes inside but a likeness or a fascimile" (1). The peach/semens combination functions as a clear mode of the subject and object/likeness interaction. Oliver cannot physically consume Elio, but he can consume their mutual desire for each other through this 'proof' of desire: the returned gaze attains its physical confirmation. This returned gaze is rooted back to Bristow's claims in *Sexuality*, "the subject expresses desire through the power to consume" (54). In Oliver consuming Elio and the peach, he no longer remains the object of Elio's gaze, and instead becomes an active subject who willingly reciprocates Elio's desire. This skein of desire is continuously twisted and complicated by these inversions of possession and desires.

In addition to this physical and sexual intermingling, Elio also aims to connect to and identify with Oliver on an emotional level. Through intentionally showing his emotions to Oliver but also unintentionally breaking down crying, Elio places Oliver's gaze on himself, not only inverting the possessive and consumptive peach, but also taking away the objectifying gaze he held. In particular, the passage continues with a repetitive explication for the emotional reaction:

I was crying because no stranger had ever been so kind or gone so far for me. . . . I was crying because I'd never known so much gratitude and there was no other way to show it. And I was crying for the evil thoughts I'd nursed against him this morning. . . .crying because something was happening, and I had no idea what it was. (149-50)

The focus on the causes and effect of the crying tells readers that Elio is reacting in a deeply positive way to Oliver's performative and consumptive action. In stating "there was no other way to show it" Elio is reminding readers that the interactions between Oliver and Elio are not a one-sided gaze, but an interplay between two people. Similarly, the explicit description of an

unexpected level of kindness mirrors a previous scene in the novel where Elio discusses Oliver's writing, another deeply personal act of creation (28). Oliver in the previous scene had expressed a deep gratitude for Elio's kindness, and Elio in this scene is mirroring that. Finally, in looking at Elio's self-stated reasons for crying, readers see that his initial discomfort and negative thoughts about them having sex the night before is nullified by Oliver eating the peach. This, in part with the "something happening," indicates that Elio's emotional release can be tied to his shift from an objectifying gaze, to an interactive and active person.

While Elio's narration places a large emphasis on a possessive nature and his objectifying gaze, it is also intimately interwoven with the question of identification and the ways in which Elio desires Oliver and his body. In particular, Elio asks himself and readers the question, "Are 'being' and 'having' thoroughly accurate verbs in the twisted skein of desire, where having someone's body to touch and being that someone we're longing to touch are one and the same?" (Aciman 68). As readers later see in the passages described above and throughout the text, the interplay between possession and being can be difficult to tease apart, particularly in response to same-sex desire. The complication stems from how one can identify/identify with their desire. In Bristow's *Sexuality*, he references Sieber to state that identity "designates the process through which people identify with 'a set of social narratives, ideas, myths, values and types of knowledge of varying reliability, usefulness, and verifiability'" (201). In this way, readers can see that the desire to be (or identify) and identifying desire both rely on the social context of one's input. For Elio, Oliver possesses desirable characteristics that Elio wants to also have (such as the restraint from earlier) and Oliver *is* the object of Elio's desire. Both of these intertwined aspects of identification rely on Elio comprehending a particular set of narratives about himself

and Oliver. However, not only is this skein of desires twisted by the need to confess and acknowledge desires, but it is also twisted and shaped through Elio's construction of time.

Time

Justin Hudak, writing about *Call Me by Your Name*, claims that time can have universal effects on people (158). However, in looking at the ways in which Elio describes his relationship with Oliver and time, readers can see an inherently queer struggle that ties together confession, desire, and time in ways that demonstrates time as subjective. Specifically, Hudak says, "If there were to be a spectator of evil in *CMBYN*, it would have to be the common enemy of us all: Time, which does not discriminate on the basis of age or sexual orientation" (158). While the restrictive aspects of time in the novel, such as the upcoming end of summer is an intrinsic trope of impermanence, the ways in which time is portrayed through Elio's narration, readers see that sexual orientation and desire affect and are affected by the passage of time in the novel.

Hudak's statement, while well-intentioned, conflicts with queer theorists such as Nishant Shahani who conceptualize certain organizations of time and reflection as inherently queer. Shahani discusses the ways in which ontological questions about sexuality/gender identity like "when did I/you first know?" . . . necessitate a retrospective looking back and rethinking of signs, actions, behaviors, speech acts, and attachments (erotic and otherwise)" (1). In the framing of this retrospection, one can understand how deeply Elio's reflective narrative style performs these actions. Elio, as a narrator repeatedly demonstrates instances of confession or action as ontological landmarks within the novel. In closely looking at the ways in which Elio narrates the novel through retrospections, readers can see that the novel demonstrates time's effects as dependent on sexual desires as well as age.

One aspect of time in the novel that is altered in Elio's narration is tied directly to his confusion about his desire. Time for Elio, is structured by desire as he narrates, "all I really wanted was one night with him, just one night—one hour, even—if only to determine whether I wanted him for another night after that" (42-3). The question of a more than fleeting desire seems to stem from a need to perform the action. In this reflective moment, Elio comes to the conclusion that he needs one specific defining moment. This retrospection shapes Elio's narrative structuring of time much in the ways that Shanini discusses—where one's understanding of the past needs to correspond to their current understanding of self. The specific pressure to comprehend one's sexual desire through one specific action is an inherently queer comprehension of time framed through the complications of sexual desires.

The novel is framed also by the conflict between a potential future and the knowledge that the summer will end. Specifically, the novel begins with the emphasis on Oliver's use of the phrase 'later': "*Later!*" The word, the voice, the attitude. I'd never heard anyone use 'later' to say goodbye before. It sounded harsh, curt and dismissive, spoken with the veiled indifference of people who may not care to see or hear from you again. It is the first thing I remember about him, and I can hear it still today" (3). Both the emphasis on the phrase throughout the novel via italics, and the usage of the phrase to begin the novel indicate Aciman's desire to use perceived notions of permanence as a motif in the novel. In this introduction Elio reflects upon the implied meaning behind 'later' as one of indifference. In contrasting that reflection with Elio telling readers that this phrase is one of the most memorable aspects of Oliver, from the start of the novel Aciman reveals Elio as a narrator whose structuring of time is subjective. Specifically, through this inversion of characteristics, readers already see the divide in emotional investment perceived by Elio.

Furthermore, this concept of ‘later’ and its value continues to structure and subjectify Elio’s reflective narration throughout the novel. Specifically, the usage of the phrase ‘later’ comes to take on more elaborate meanings throughout the novel, and Elio’s distinction between himself and Oliver is emphasized through this. The conflict Elio faces about taking action on his desire, as well as his conceptualized differences between himself and Oliver both conglomerate around this idea of ‘later:’

Try again later were the last words I’d spoken to myself every night when I’d sworn to do something to bring Oliver closer to me. *Try again later* meant, I haven’t the courage now. Things weren’t ready *just yet*. Where I’d find the will and the courage to *try again later* I didn’t know. But resolving to do something rather than sit passively made me feel that I was already doing something. . . But I also knew that I was circling wagons around my life with *try again later*s, and that months, seasons, entire years, a lifetime could go by with nothing but Saint Try-again-later stamped on every day. *Try again later* worked for people like Oliver. *If not later, when?* was my shibboleth. (51-2).

Through the particular use of italics, emphasis is placed on the phrases where the conflict between time and action is most apparent. Elio is placing himself in a moment where he realizes that without choosing to act, time will continue on without him and without regards to his desires. However, his description of a cyclic life implies that this choice is stagnate and protective, like wagons circling. In conceptualizing the lack of courage and the understanding that there are aspects of shame that are preventing this action, the cyclic effects of time can also be seen. Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank make a particularly useful claim involving a cyclic inescapability that can be tied to Elio’s own subjective structuring of time; that “shame is characterized by its failure ever to renounce its object cathexis, its relation to the desire for pleasure as well as the need to avoid pain” (526). In this failure to renounce, readers similarly see Elio failing to renounce this mantra of a potential ‘later.’ With a vague descriptor of time such as

‘later,’ Elio attempts to push the inevitable action into an abstract place in time. However, in ending this passage with the turn of phrase ‘If not later, when?’ Elio reminds readers that ‘later’ is too abstract of a term. Through both the reinforcement that the former phrase correlates to failure and the structural nature of the latter phrase in this phrase, Elio must act in order to break this cyclic pattern that entraps him.

However, the use of ‘later’ is not the only subjective form of time that affects Elio’s ability to untangle the complicated skein of desire in the novel. In particular, a conversation between Elio and Oliver goes as follows: “‘We wasted so many days—so many weeks.’ ‘Wasted? I don’t know. Perhaps we needed time to figure out if this is what we wanted’” (Aciman 155). On one hand, one might be tempted to immediately believe, as Elio does, that the build-up of time before they acknowledged their mutual desire and acted upon it as a ‘waste.’ However, when remembering the intense cycle of desire and shame and indecision that Elio goes through before this, one can more easily take Oliver’s side of the argument—that the time was necessary. While Hudak believes time was not discriminatory based on sexual desire, here we can see that time does act on sexual desires in different ways depending on the subjects involved. Specifically, as seen through Elio’s intense conflicts about Oliver, the time before they acknowledged their desire for each other was built up by the desire for confession and complicated interactions that made up the inversion of gazes.

In this manner, the flawed concept of ‘wasted time’ exhibits the ways in which retrospection, especially when describing the structuring of time, functions to detail the ways in which individuals conceptualize their interactions with the world through their desires. In particular, through conceptualizing this time-structuring as a case history, it can be grounded in the history of sexology to emphasize the function of the case study as a “discursive form [that]

frequently resembles a confession. . .[and] how the case history is itself a structure of representation that shapes and manipulates information according to generic and narrative conventions” (Bristow 17-8). As Elio’s reflective narration functions to detail his sexual desire in ways that subjectify time through ideas of ‘waste’ and crux points that test desire, one can see how clearly time is affected and becomes subjective based upon sexuality and desire. Hudak reads this text through a lens that attempts to retain a normative structure of time where people are affected and bound by time in cohesive connected ways, one Elizabeth Freeman calls “chrononormativity” (3). However, when looking at the ways in which time fails to fulfill Hudak’s claim, Elio’s retrospective narration inherently resists this as he works through his desires. The desires that make up the novel are tangled, and Elio attempts to untwist this skein through this framing of his narrative.

Hudak may have misattributed an objectivity to time, but he also gives attention the unique nature of a relationship like Elio and Oliver’s. In particular, he states that “Part of the beauty of *CMBYN* lies in its subtle recognition that times have not always been, and will not always be, so kind to the likes of Oliver and Elio” (Hudak 158). By the ‘likes of Oliver and Elio’ readers can comprehend that Hudak is referring to the same-sex nature of the relationship, but also to the fleeting impermanence of their relationship. Hudak bounds the impact of their relationship in time, not only to emphasize this impermanence, but also to recognize that timing has affected their relationship. In particular, Elio reveals to readers that over time, he has nostalgically preserved his idealization of Oliver when he states “Over the years I’d lodged him in the permanent past, my pluperfect lover, put him on ice, stuffed him with memories and mothballs like a hunted ornament confabulating with the ghost of all my evenings” (233). Not only is this image quite a possessive one, it emphasizes the contrast in time scales of the novel.

This novel not only is narrated over the period of a summer but is narrated from the distance of many years post-summer and as such, is a fragmented, idealized, and nostalgic possession of their relationship from that age. Through emphasizing Oliver as his “pluperfect lover” Elio places him in a grammatical form of the past perfect, as the lover who comes before all lovers. In this nostalgic summary of Oliver, age also impacts the structuring of time as Oliver literally preserves the artifacts of clothing from Oliver, as well as figuratively doing the same with his memories of Oliver (213).

On the note of age and time, the unique ‘likes of Oliver and Elio’ is also shown to be age- and desire-dependent from the view of Elio’s father. This comes to fruition in one of the final scenes where Elio’s father attempts to impart his own reflections and gaze upon Elio and Oliver’s relationship:

I may have come close, but I never had what you had. Something always held me back or stood in the way. How you live your life is your business. But remember, our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. Most of us can’t help but live as though we’ve got two lives to live, one is the mockup, the other the finished version, and then there are all those versions in between. But there’s only one, and before you know it, your heart is worn out, and, as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it, much less wants to come near it. Right now there’s sorrow. I don’t envy the pain. But I envy you the pain. (225)

In this passage Elio’s father avoids imparting a specific characterization upon Elio and Oliver’s relationship. Instead, he places focus on the ways in which time affects the possibility for these types of relationships. He emphasizes the ways in which aging leads to changes in desire over physical bodies, implying that his own body is undesirable. What this focus on bodily desire does is contradict the universal claims of time. Time does discriminate based on age as for Elio, this summer holds a subjectively longer period in his reflective mind, while his father was too

old to be affected in such a way. Similarly, age or inexperience is shown to be a factor for constructing the passage of time for Elio, with reference to the previous passage about needing one moment to confirm his desire. Most importantly, Elio's father emphasizes the ways in which his inaction led to him never having the unique relationship that Elio and Oliver have. With the emphasis on the act of growing up and aging in this passage, readers can conceptualize the ways in which time does discriminate on the basis of age: as one ages, they become less desirable, less able to emotionally connect, and less able to experience pain and pleasure in particular ways. Similarly, readers are only able to comprehend this discrimination through the retrospection of Elio's father indicating that time affects one's ability to view the world and reflect upon one's identity or rather shifting identities.

Jack Halberstam contrasts queer time with non-queer time based on the influences of various structures: For this novel, queer time exists in opposition to the patriarchal family lineage, so Elio's father's advice takes on a particular tint, having repressed his own desires (Halberstam 1). While Elio's father is attempting to impart a structure of time based upon age and desire, he also reinforces his inability to have possessed or experienced the relationship that Elio and Oliver did. What this distinction, as well as his envy not for pain but for Elio, does is reminds readers that this relationship is outside the bounds of a heterosexual linear familial time structure. Placing the relationship in opposition to the father's structuring of time is one of the aspects that makes gives this novel a queer retrospection.

The ways in which Elio's retrospection influences his conceptualization of the summer continues throughout the novel, emphasizing the irresolvable twisted nature of desire within the text. Specifically, his shift towards a regret of not speaking in the last lines of the novel reveal the importance of his ability to reflect as a response to this unresolved desire. In concluding the

novel, Elio reflects on a moment twenty years post-summer to emphasize the ways in which the entire novel is based upon a particular nostalgic retrospection of that summer:

If you remember everything, I wanted to say, and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you're just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there's not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name. (248).

In creating these multiple layers of reflection, Elio acts as a deeply constructive narrator who in the conclusion of the novel is able to give readers one last glimpse into the love story that is comprised of gazes, possession, inversion, and a painfully sweet nostalgia. In particular, Elio's questioning of Oliver's memory and questioning of parallel identities reinforces the ways in which reflection on the past emphasizes the subjectivity of that retrospection: Oliver may not place the same value on the memories as Elio does, but in hopes of regaining that sense of desire—both the 'being' and having'—Elio emphasizes through the reflective ('as you did back then'), the physical ('hold my gaze'), and the inverted possessive('call me by your name') that the value of the relationship is placed upon the im/permanence of the desire. Through this reflected regret in a lack of final confession, Elio remains left with this twisted skein of desire. In this sense, time is meant not to act as a barrier to their connection, but as a conduit for Elio to reflect upon a summer where his desires were expressed, reciprocated, and complicated.

Conclusion

I have followed three threads—confession, gaze, and time—in Aciman's portrayal of the development of a relationship between two men that is bound up with a twisted skein of their desires. Not only do the characters face complications due to social constraints, they are constrained by their own internal desires and outward identities. Tied up in the social constraints

of verbal communication, Elio objectifies Oliver and uses a metaphor of fruit to conflate his body with a consumable desire. Furthermore, while Elio attempts to enact an objectifying gaze in the novel, Oliver's ability to return his gaze turns their relationship from an objectification of a subject into an interaction between two people. Finally, through Elio's inherently subjective retrospective narration, their desires and relationship are twisted into a queer relationship outside the normative bounds of time. However, through the twists and complications revealed through these three aspects of the novel, Aciman is able to reveal the inherently unresolvable complications of same-sex desires.

While this paper was able to investigate the ways in which identity, actions, and subjectivity influence desires, both Elio and Oliver also exhibit desires for other people within the novel. One potential furthering of this text's twisted skein of desires would be to explore the ways in which Elio's relationship with and desire for Marzia influence and are influenced by his relationship with and desire for Oliver. Similarly, further exploring the ways in which Oliver is desired by the cast of female characters in the novel would allow for additional consideration of desires that may or may not also be possessive. In pursuing further complications of time and desire, expanding the analysis of this paper and the relationship between Elio and Oliver into the sequel of this novel—*Find Me*—presents potential twists to the retrospective narration of this novel. However, much like the necessary end of the summer in this novel, so too must come the conclusion of this analysis: too soon, and yet also, just soon enough.

This novel affords Aciman and readers the opportunity to explore the emotional complications of same-sex desire within an idyllic retrospection. Through this, Aciman is able to demonstrate the ways in which identity and desires, particularly non-heteronormative desires, are constructed and affected by concepts of physical and verbal communication. For readers who

may not be familiar with same-sex desires, Aciman constructs a story where the reader is able to notice the ways in which desires are complicated and how those complications can be irresolvable.

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